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ABSTRACT

The works of women African writers such as Bessie Head, Mariama Ba, Buchi Emecheta, and Flora Nwapa have become increasingly familiar to North American college students during the past decade, largely through their inclusion on feminist reading lists. Because the pedagogical value of these texts lies in their presumed ability to speak for African women, the texts are to greater or lesser degrees decontextualized from the material circumstances of production. Rather, they are interrogated with apparently oppositional questions. In identity-based questions, the African woman presumably defined by such questions is, according to Michelle Rosaldo, an image of "ourselves undressed." This exposes the author, cast in the role of spokesperson for the African Woman, to interrogations about her own authenticity. Conversely, another range of questions deconstructs identity-based assumptions and ultimately resists the imperialist politics of representation and authenticity. Both approaches attempt to keep cultural assumptions: both attribute a primal illiteracy to the speakers of "mother tongues" and assume that deconstructive literacy is deployed only in western languages. To use any text as a bridge between academics and African women, it is necessary to be attentive to what degree the factors that shape western notions of literacy are operative in Africa. Such considerations as the traditional privileging of written over oral narrative and culturally encoded interpretive reading practices have crucial implications for the way texts written by women African writers are "consumed" in western classrooms as cultural products. (SAM)

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Reading African Women Readers

I originally wrote this paper for a conference in Nigeria called "International Conference on Women in Africa and the African Diaspora: Bridges Across Activism and the Academy." As you can tell from the title, the conference was meant to bring together two communities that share similar goals but that rely on different protocols and strategies to attain them. It was such an audience that this paper was intended to address. Unfortunately, I was unable to attend the conference. However, although I try to be sensitive to adapting a paper to suit a particular audience, I've decided that it would be relevant for the purposes of this presentation to not change the paper to fit my present audience, but rather to encourage you to imagine yourselves as members of such an audience.

The works of women African writers such as Bessie Head of South Africa, Mariama Bâ of Senegal, and Buchi Emecheta and Flora Nwapa of Nigeria have become increasingly familiar to North American college students during the past decade, largely through their inclusion on feminist reading lists. These texts are in most instances considered to act as bridges between North American college readers and an entity known as "the African Woman." Because their value in these classroom situations lies in their presumed ability to speak for African women, the texts are to greater or lesser degrees decontextualized from the material circumstances of production that brought the texts to the hands of a professor in Claremont or Poughkeepsie. Rather, the texts themselves are interrogated, with the questions falling roughly into two ranges that at first appear to be oppositional but that, I would argue, share some crucial cultural assumptions.

In the first range are found the identity-based kinds of questions asked by the earliest criticism of women African writers. These are also the kinds of questions most students bring to these texts in classes. What is it like to be an African Woman? How do you feel and what do you think? About men? Marriage? Motherhood? Patriarchy? Begging the questions of what it is to be a

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woman, a mother, a member of society, these questions, rather than give insight into "real" African women, often, and often inadvertently, colonize the image by subsuming it into a "universalist" feminist discourse in order to make available for examination the "roots of sexism" (Chimalum Nwankwo) in "primitive" society. The African Woman sought here is, in the words of Michelle Rosaldo, an image of "ourselves undressed." This undressing exposes the author, who has been cast into the role of spokesperson for the African Woman, to interrogations about her own authenticity. Can this writer speak for the "Real African Woman," or is she too acculturated, too upper class, too literate--in short too deracinated from what we came to these texts to see: her subalterneity? [1]

The second range of questions asked by readers of these texts follows the first, chronologically, in terms of the critical reception of the texts, and causally, in terms of addressing the critical questions about representation and authenticity I have only just very briefly raised. Thus, they ask not whether an author is authentic enough to represent the African woman but in what ways the author deconstructs such identity-based assumptions and ultimately resists the imperialist politics of representation and authenticity.[2] Such writers recognize that these works do not operate as transparent indicators of African culture but are products of what Mary Louise Pratt has called contact zones: "social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination" (4). However, I would argue that such "readings" of these texts' meanings are not the themselves contact zone readings--where cultural meanings, as well as cultural forms, meet and clash--but are, like the first range of questions, primarily motivated by questions about ourselves (here I mean western women). Instead of an image of ourselves undressed, they seek an image of ourselves redressed.

This is not to deny or devalue the important cultural work done by postcolonial women writers who are engaged in the construction of such images. But, in terms of establishing a "bridge" across possible chasms of cultural difference, I fear both approaches may be one-way in terms of some cultural assumptions they keep in place. While one privileges authenticity and origins and the other positionality and hybridity, one axis these supposed differences turn on is

their shared assumptions about literacy. In one's expectation that the subaltern be illiterate is reflected the expectation of the other that the postcolonial be literate--in western languages: in Gaytri Spivak's words, postcolonial women writers such as Assia Djebar "expose . . . identity [by using] the historically hegemonic languages" (Acting 770). Both positions attribute a primal illiteracy to speakers of "mother tongues" and assume that deconstructive literacy is deployed only in western languages. And the type of literacy both project is the close, individualized, analytical reading practices that we (and by "we" I mean the academic "we") take for granted, but which was in fact socially developed over several centuries of European history and psychologically developed in each of us over years of personal experience--an experience that more than anything else has given us our identities--such as they are. In other words, a literacy in which "we"--as teachers, as readers, as writers--have quite a stake.

To begin to use a text--any text--as a bridge between academics and African women, we would at the very least need to be attentive to what degree the factors that shape our notion of literacy are operative in Africa. Only then can we begin to "read" these texts as "African texts" in the same sense that we try to strive to understand American or British literatures in terms of their cultural matrix. In one sense, I am suggesting the need for cultural studies work that directs attention to the material bases of literacy and their social repercussions in African nations similar to the kind of work done by Raymond Williams, E. P. Thompson, and Richard Hoggart in relation to British culture and society. But even here, we should be careful not to read African "literature" solely in terms of the European experience, but instead entertain the possibility that the familiar indices of literacy might have a different import when applied to prevailing forms of African literacy. For example, the "technologizing of the [African] word" may not involve print so much as electronic reproduction of the spoken word, and by so doing avoid the logocentric consequences of what Jacques Derrida has called the linearization of writing. For, one lesson of Derrida that Spivak elides is that what we call writing is only only a <u>particular</u> kind of writing--and that the myth of presence is just that--a myth, and cannot be continually reinscribed onto mother tongues. We should, therefore, be particularly attentive as possible to <u>how</u> texts are read. Is the process by

which we assume these texts speak for African women reflected in African ways of reading? And how does this literacy articulate with economic and social factors, such as education, language, and class. In short, how does the subaltern "read"?

An example of reading in the contact zone is found in Susan Blake's Letters from Togo (1991), which chronicles her experiences as a white American Fulbright lecturer in Togo, West Africa. In a chapter entitled, "The Color Purple," Blake recounts how she had given a copy of Alice Walker's novel to a friend, a Ghanaian English teacher. Blake learned that this woman, whom she calls Vera, then passed the book on to her aunt, who in turn read the book and retold the story in Mina, the local market language, to her sister and niece at their weekly storytelling sessions.[3] When she heard about this retelling, Blake was, in her word, "astonished." She immediately recognized an opportunity to , in effect, cross the bridge between western intellectuals and African women to explore a number of questions. She wanted to know how African women evaluated representation. Considering Walker's portrayal of [West] Africa to be the "most problematic aspect of the novel," Blake writes "Here was a chance to ask African women what they thought of it." In addition, Blake was interested in how African women with "tenaciously held traditions" (157) would respond to the "new possibilities" in sex, gender and family relationships (156) that the novel introduces. But above all, Blake recognized an opportunity to find out how the subaltern reads. She writes, "We American feminist academics seize a book like The Color Purple, devour it, teach it, analyze it, praise it, but unconsciously translate it into terms that connect with our own lives. We may not wonder how it would strike a reader whose life was like that of Celie, the abused black country girl . . . Or if we do wonder, we don't know any women like this to ask. They're not in our classes and they're probably not reading novels" (156). Blake was therefore particularly interested in the responses of Vera's Aunt Amano, who "speaks only Mina and does not read at all," because she felt that her experience would be close to that of Celie. Blake says that "Amano was a 'reader' who was like Celie at least in her relationship to language" (156). In other words, they are both illiterate, subalterns. She asked to attend the next storytelling meeting to talk with the women about the novel.

Blake's account of the visit, which she characterizes as "pleasant but frustrating" (157), illustrates the complexities of communication in the contact zone. There is, first, confusion about language. It is finally agreed that the conversation will take place in Mina, with Vera translating for Blake, who doesn't speak Mina. Blake reports that "between the natural meanderings of a conversation, the interruptions as other family members came and went. . . , the conflicting assumptions of the several participants, and the multiple layers of translation, the whole experience was pretty confusing" (158). The very depth of the confusion only became apparent to her later, when her audio-recording of the conversation was translated into English by a more objective--coincidentally male--non-participant. She then discovered additional dimensions to the conversation she was not aware of at the time, caused, in part by Vera's reinterpretations of the exchanges in her translations. For example, when Blake asked her question about the the novel's portrayal of Africa, the question was translated by Vera as "What do you think of those men in the village who didn't do anything when their houses were demolished? (158).

Ultimately, however, and thanks to the recording and the second translator, Blake conquers this confusion to draw some conclusions about the meaning of her experience--conclusions which ultimately affirm her initial assumptions and recoup her epistemological equilibrium. Observing that the women, who came from different educational backgrounds, were very different kinds of readers, Blake was most impressed by Amano, who at first balked at all the questions, but who eventually "was the one who offered the most substantial comments. And as the discussion developed, she stopped demurring, became involved, asked questions of her own" (160). Blake evinces surprise at Amano's response, which is closest to the kind that Blake attributes to highly literate academics who "unconsciously translate [novels] into terms that connect with our own lives." Blake writes, "Amano stepped inside the story; she was Celie when Celie was abused; she was Tashi when Tashi was pulled out of school. It was Amano, the illiterate, to whom the novel was life" (162). Blake, however, crucially attributes this response to something very different from her own ability to translate a work into terms that connect with her own life. Rather, she attributes it to Amano recognizing her reflection in Celie. Upon questioning Vera, Blake learns and

reports to us that, like Celie, Amano was taken out of school early in life and like Celie, Amano endures a miserable forced marriage. Unconsciously putting her finger on the nature of her quest--to test the bridge of representation by which we can know the subaltern through representations of her by more privileged, articulate, "others," Blake conclude this chapter with an affirmation--however tentative--curiously legitimated through an intermediary, the translator, a university English major Blake calls Améyou. Upon being told Amano's story, he says, "I know Amano. I mean, not Amano specifically, but I know her" (162), and he goes on to recount how her life is like that of other African women he knows or knows of. Blake concludes the chapter with "I feel I've come to know Amano a little, too. But only a little. And that little has taken so much--the unlikely catalyst of a novel in common, professorial persistence, a tape recorder, two translators, and time. And it seems out of sync, like a satellite telephone call, to come to that feeling of recognition now with Améyou and not three weeks ago with Amano" (162).

What Blake ultimately affirms in her feeling of recognition is western literacy's power--a power that keeps the subject-object/knower-known relationship in place while holding out the promise that, through academic literacy, the subaltern can achieve subjectivity and a degree of agency--for Blake has found the novel did challenge Amano's "traditional views": "Amano had gotten from the novel encouragement to be less humble" (159-60).

Without attempting a more correct interpretation of the experience that Blake reports, I want to offer two observations for consideration. First, I ask you to consider that the facility with which Amamo's way of reading takes the fictional text into her own life is not as different from that of the academics as Blake contends--nor is it much different from Amano's own "traditional" ways of reading narrative. The difference in the two groups of readers can be marked by the nature of the text--a written text on one hand, an oral text on the other, which is, in fact, what we have: the novel many of us have read (and which Blake assumes is the object under discussion) and the narrative as related in a story telling session in Mina, which not even Blake can describe to us. As oral theorists such as Jack Goody and Walter Ong note, in the latter context the meaning of narrative is highly contingent upon the immediate participants, who are not only able but expected

to translate it into terms that connect it with their own lives. Amano's facility with the text did not come about in spite of her illiteracy, as Blake implies, but because of her orality. In this sense, the academic's ability to make a text one's own could be considered an appropriative derivation of this "traditional" faculty--and not a challenge to traditional ways of knowing and doing.

Secondly, questions that guide meaning into channels of interpretive reading practices may overlook other ways of reading. Janice Radway, who sought answers to the question "how does the subaltern read?" in relation to the generally working-class readers of popular romances, was more attentive to ascribing some validity to the confusing answers given to her questions about the meaning of a work. She writes in the introduction to her study, Reading the Romance, that she initially intended to contrast interpretations of romances by literary critics with the interpretations made by popular consumers. She soon discovered in her interviews with the subjects of her study that her questions about "the meaning of romances" were answered with discussions about "the meaning of romance reading as an activity and a social event in a familial context" (7). Radway was subsequently not only sensitive to this distinction, but makes it central to her analysis, which eventually produced two very different, even contradictory, conclusions about "the meaning of the act [of reading] and the meaning of the text as read" (210).

Blake's experience suggests the possibility that the answers we need to seek may be more even complicated and, perhaps ultimately, more threatening to us and our ways of knowing that she or we suspect (and here, still, "we" are academics). It may be that perhaps our ways of "knowing" ourselves and others, even resistant others, through cultural objects are not as universal as we would like to admit. On the other hand, communal ways of reading that depart from the text, into "interruptions" by family members, into "meandering" conversations, into conflicting assumptions, may be more liberatory than introspective close readings. In such cases the text itself might not be "life" but may be what it in fact is--an object around which life takes place. Perhaps to Amano the text was merely a catalyst for social interaction--and action--rather than life itself. Perhaps for Amano such objects simply don't have the power to define and control individual self-identity.

Perhaps not all cultures and perhaps not even all classes within "Western" culture consider objects to have this power. Perhaps learning to "read" such objects is not the only way to deal with that power. While this notion may threaten us as academics who, despite rhetoric to the contrary, still have an institutional need to capture, contain, and know our object of study, it may be something we have to face up to as we enter a truly new world order, one that is not only "multi-cultural" but predominantly, even if secondarily, oral (or postliterate). We might all listen to Michael Jackson, watch Dallas--and read Buchi Emecheta and Alice Walker--but we might not all "consume" these cultural products in exactly the same way.

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[1] This is the perspective taken by many male African literary critics, who, while willing and able to see multiple and conflicting cultural and class impulses at work in the works of male African writers, seem to find it quite natural to put women in place as objects of representation. Femi Ojo-Ade, for example, advocates that readers turn to women writers because "only women can best represent their interests in society. Only a mother knows what it is to bear a child" yet simultaneously excuses writers like Buchi Emecheta (who had, incidentally, borne five children prior to writing her many novels) "from the list of African authors," declaring that "her viewpoint ought not to be turned into a war cry for every African woman" (21) because it is formed from painful personal--and therefore non-representative--experience with patriarchy.

[2] Within this perspective, the works of Buchi Emecheta are said to "struggle to prevent post-colonial discourse being written by others on the terrain of their bodies . . . whether by the colonizer or by the indigenous nationalist" (Haraway 122).

[3] I say, "Blake calls," because I am not certain that is her real name. As a resident of Lomé for two years following the year Blake was there, I know some of the people she discusses in the book and know that Blake has used pseudonyms for many, but not all, of the people she mentions.

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